

**ASSESSMENT IN THE  
"CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS"  
(1/2)**

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### INTRODUCTION

Languages, being in a state of constant creativity, tend to coin some phrases, give new meanings to other ones...and even make some phrases obsolete due to disuse; but the reality is that many phrases are expressive in themselves and continue to be so: it is a nominal matter.

The word and the concept of "assessment" are abundantly present, and have been for many years, in various levels of society. It is undoubtedly in the field of education where there has been and continues to be "assessment" used as an effective instrument to achieve a quality education.

Three-hundred years ago the sons of John Baptist de La Salle, with different terminology and concepts, devoted themselves to the same pedagogical reality. The term "assessment" was not known but there was a continual "changing of level" in the classroom which presupposed, as we will show later on, a continual and complex form of assessment.

### THE SCHOOL IN THE "CONDUCT"

The schools that were used as the basis for drawing up the pedagogical treatise of the *Conduct* generally consisted of two or three classes. The possibilities that this arrangement offered for student placement in line with their abilities were indeed very limited. The difficulties increased on the one hand because of the imbalance between the students' chronological age and their intellectual age; on the other hand there were difficulties in the growing number of students in the classroom - the numbers reached into the sixties.

The Brothers solved these pedagogical obstacles by establishing different levels for the subject areas that they taught within each classroom. Lucky for them that the number of subject areas was very limited: *reading, writing and arithmetic*. In this way each Lasallian class became a complex graduated pedagogical unit. From the beginning the Brothers were helped by the advanced students but without detriment to their respective personal studies.

I believe it appropriate to expound systematically on the subject areas with their levels and grades so that the reader can appreciate while looking at the overall picture, the multi-level evaluation that the Lasallian teacher needed to carry out periodically for "*the change in level or grade*" prior to assessing the student.

#### Reading

The reading method suggested by the *Conduct* was a progressive one which began with reading posters and ended up with reading manuscripts. Here is the basic level enumeration: the ABC's, posters by syllables, syllables themselves,

1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level readers, the psalter for reading in Latin, the book of Christian civility and then manuscripts. In each one of these there was *one level and three grades: beginning, middle and advanced or "perfect"*. In the posters phase there was only one grade and two in the book on Christian civility; on the other hand there were six grades in the manuscripts. So there were *twenty-four* grades all together in the reading process that was regulated by the *Conduct*.

#### Writing

In the time of De La Salle, the goal for writing classes was to obtain good calligraphers and so the time and effort dedicated to this end were important. The learning of writing was also minutely detailed in the pages of the *Conduct* according to its type. It began by distinguishing eight grades which the students needed to pass through before they dedicated themselves to specific types of *rounded* and *italic* writing that included six grades each. The advanced or "perfect" calligraphist had to go through twenty grades, step-by-step, on the calligraphy scale. The reduction of grades when compared with reading was more than compensated for by the greater precision required in completing the content and, therefore, it was more difficult to pass from one level to the next.

#### Arithmetic

The arithmetic section consisted of only one level with five grades, corresponding to the first four arithmetic operations and the fifth was for the ability to carry out division tasks. In this subject area it was easier to determine a change in level.

The preceding shows the vast area in which Lasallian teachers and students carried out their daily activities which today we know as "assessment". What follows is an attempt to demonstrate that, for three-hundred years, assessment has been an active and effective part of the Lasallian school.

### THE NAME AND CONCEPT OF "ASSESSMENT"

As we noted above, the term "assessment" does not appear in the *Conduct* even once. However, the pedagogical procedure to which the treatise devotes many pages corresponds today to what is known in current parlance as assessment. De La Salle continually used the expression "*change of lesson*" that we will translate from now on to be *change of level* and this supposed that the student passed from one level to another higher one in whichever of the subjects he was enrolled. The term *change of grade* was also used. Both terms played an important role in the Lasallian educational system. The *Conduct* says it this way: "one of the most important practices in the school is that of *changing students appropriately*; the Inspector of schools will act on this accordingly" (1, page 272).

### PROCESS FOR THE CHANGE OF LEVEL

The extensive number of pages that the *Conduct* devotes to students' changing of levels is even augmented in the *Regulations for the duties of the Inspector of Schools*. These pages show in great detail the complex and meticulous procedure for the changing of grade and level. Although we will do this briefly, we will show some of the circumstances surrounding this procedure: the time to *change*, factors that are involved and agents which intervene in said change.

#### **TIME TO CHANGE**

The *Conduct* is very explicit and definitive with regard to this: "Changes of level will be carried out at the time and in

the way mandated. The Inspector of schools will remind the teachers at the end of each month concerning the day on which they will have to examine the students who wish to present themselves to be changed" (2, p. 273). Since the Inspector had to normally visit several schools, the time frame included the last few days of the current month and the first days of the next one.

This regular monthly occurrence demanded that the teacher continually have a personal and individualized knowledge of his students, since it was not possible to present them indiscriminately, but "they had to be *very well prepared* so that they would not be disappointed upon being approved by the teacher but failed by the Inspector" (3, p. 21)

The students, for their part, were continually motivated by the possibility that their effort would be rewarded by moving up to a higher grade or level: they did not have to wait until the end of the semester or the end of the course.

In all justice we can say that this period of control of continuous assessment was done with a view to changing grade or level.

## FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE CHANGE

Factors involved in the change of grade and level are various. I will divide them into two categories: objective factors and subjective factors. The objective factors involve specific elements that are easily measurable; the subjective factors depend more upon the agents themselves.

### **OBJECTIVE FACTORS**

The Conduct devotes a long and substantive chapter to the issue of class absences (4, pp. 180-196). The author knew all too well just how unmotivated towards the school the students and parents were, especially the poor ones. The solution was in prevention, constancy and firmness, using pedagogical corrective measures which the school provided.

A student recorded absences and tardiness for both the morning and afternoon in the catalogue that each classroom had for that purpose. Absences needed to be justified: helping parents, taking care of younger siblings, helping with the grape harvest, etc.; in cases such as these, the teacher was tolerant and the penalty was less.

In terms of changing grade or level, the teachers and the students were aware that the following could not be promoted even though they had the necessary knowledge:

1. Those who with permission had been absent for five whole days during the month.
2. Those who without permission had missed two complete days.
3. Those who were tardy six times (5, p. 275).

Another condition that was a *sine qua non* in order for the student to be promoted was his *adequate training* in the material that was tested: that which today we refer to as content. For this assessment the Conduct spelled out in great detail the evaluations of the teacher and the Inspector. For each subject area there were specific criteria to be mastered, the object of promotion.

Here is a brief sample of the great detail that the Conduct goes into over the course of several pages. "The students will read the third book for six months, specifically, two for each grade. They will change levels when they have mastered the three grades". "The calligraphy students of the second grade who are writing the letters c, o, i, f, m shall not be promoted until they have written these for three months". "Students shall not be promoted from the first grade of arith-

metic in which they learn addition if they do not know how to solve all types of addition problems" (6, pp. 276 and 286).

The Conduct repeatedly insists on achieving *understanding* and that the students are *very well prepared* for the exam since a failure would humiliate them. Only by mastering the content of the three grades of their respective level can they proceed to the next one. On the other hand, those who fail three times in succession will be sent to the bench of the *ignorant* and they will not be able to leave that place until they have succeeded in passing a grade (7, p. 289).

Surely, De La Salle's school *continually* measured the knowledge and skills of the students with progressive and preestablished yardsticks. The Inspector of schools, as the one having the final say in this "*assessment*" out of necessity placed maximum determination on this task, both to avoid having students repeat as well as to be certain that the unprepared were not promoted. This second possibility in the Conduct was considered to be very serious for it "put the student in the situation of not learning anything and thereby running the risk of remaining ignorant all his life" (8, p. 273).

### **SUBJECTIVE FACTORS**

We use this term because their evaluation did not depend upon concrete consideration but on the criteria that the teacher and the Inspector would apply to each case, taking into account the student's conduct. Today we might call these factors the student's *personal attitudes*.

The Conduct, the Lasallian school's log-book, spelled out, as in the previous section, a group of student behaviors that could negatively impact one's changing grade or level. The current pedagogy of French society of the seventeenth century gives us the rationale for applying these yardsticks.

The Lasallian school provided students many occasions to practice their piety: daily Eucharist, joint prayer both morning and afternoon, the frequent recall of the presence of God...Pages 81 to 97 of the Conduct details how both teacher and students should behave themselves during these occasions and it even includes a description of the attitudes with which they should be carried out. It follows from this that a *lack of piety* during prayers constituted an obstacle for the change of level or grade.

Added to this *devotion* for the sacred was *moderation* which regulated one's conduct and relationship with one's companions. A *moderate* or *restrained* child stayed within the limits of Christian civility, another of De La Salle's works (9, p. 274). A repeated lack of *moderation* again was cause for imposing a sanction.

At all times and in all places *laziness* and *negligence* have been students' companions on their journey. Lasallian pedagogy imposed sanctions on those who allowed themselves to be seduced by these companions. These are characterized by laziness, a lack of interest, carelessness, dislike for or rejection of studies.

These *negative qualities*, which we just pointed out, did not "per se" constitute a reason for not being promoted. The author of the Conduct was familiar with infantile fragility and so he recommends that "transgressors be examined with even more rigor and diligence than the others; but, if the same faults resurface during the following month, they should not be promoted, *even if they are working up to their ability*" (10, p. 275).

The preceding items, although not very numerous, include a *series of attitudes*, which take in the life of students. Those responsible for evaluating such attitudes are the teacher and the Inspector of schools (11, p. 273).

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